Janusz Arabski

Acquiring meaning of foreign vocabulary

Abstract: Knowing a word involves many aspects of lexical knowledge. The paper presents those which concern *form* and *meaning*. Most attention is paid to semantic structure memorization as a stage of vocabulary acquisition. Memorization of foreign vocabulary items is compared to memorization of proper names and interpreted as a similar psycholinguistic process. The following text includes passages from earlier publications of this author (Arabski, 1996, 1998).

Keywords: word, acquisition, form, meaning, stages of vocabulary acquisition, lexical knowledge

1. Knowing a word

Learning a foreign language entails learning its numerous aspects, like pronunciation, grammar, pragmatics, reading, writing, etc., but the most important is foreign vocabulary. Its acquisition is also the most time- and attention consuming. Knowing a (foreign) word involves many aspects of lexical knowledge. The most general division involves *form*, *meaning*, and *use*. Nation (2010, p. 27) presents the list of items of what is involved in knowing a word, dividing them into receptive (R) and productive (P) knowledge.

Table 1. What is involved in knowing a word

Form	spoken	R	What does the word sound like?
		P	How is the word pronounced?
	written	R	What does the word look like?
		P	How is the word written and spelled?
	word parts	R	What parts are recognizable in this word?
		P	What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	form and meaning	R	What meaning does this word form signal?
		P	What word form can be used to express this meaning?
	concept and referents	R	What is included in the concept?
		P	What items can the concept refer to?
	associations	R	What other words does this make us think of?
		P	What other words could we use instead of this one?
Use	grammatical functions	R	In what patterns does the word occur?
		P	In what patterns must we use this word?
	collocations	R	What words or types of words occur with this one?
		P	What words or types of words must we use with this one?
	constrains on use (register, frequency…)	R	Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word?
		P	Where, when, and how often can we use this word?

In this paper we are going to concentrate on *form* and *meaning*, leaving aside *use*.

2. Stages of foreign vocabulary acquisition

The following is a chronology of foreign lexis acquisition, that is, the order in which different aspects, structures, and forms of a lexical item are acquired and used. The stages of acquisition will serve here as factors which both determine acquisition and then vocabulary use.

The model of acquisition consists of the following stages:

1. Encountering a new word.
2. Filter.
3. Phonological structure.
4. Semantic structure.
5. Retention and storage.
6. Retrieval.

Encountering a new word is the first stage. Encounters take place in many settings, such as reading, television, natural conversation, etc. They also depend on individual learners' strategies, interests, and motivation. Some learners encounter new vocabulary by studying lists of words, others through reading and using dictionaries. Those who like native speakers' company and conversations with them encounter new vocabulary in natural conversation situations. The intensity with which an item is encountered does not have a direct influence on the acquisition. There is "no connection between the words that were acquired and the number of occurrences of those words in the source text. Instead there was a small (.20) but important correlation between the words acquired and their general frequency" (Brown, 1993).

After a new lexical item is encountered, it is accepted by a learner to be acquired or is rejected as an item not needed and/or not interesting. Like the acquisition of any language structure, the process starts with an affective filter which means that the condition for acquisition is the learner's positive attitude, that is, his/her eagerness and readiness to acquire. The order of acquisition of different grammatical categories may be caused by pragmatic or frequency factors, but the decisive factor is most probably the filter (filtering the data in). The best illustration of this situation is the special status of nouns in the acquisition process. Nouns are the first lexical items that are acquired. The whole process of language learning starts with the acquisition of nouns in large quantities before other lexical categories. First of all, concrete nouns are acquired, and then more and more abstract ones. Nouns seem to be filtered in before other categories.

The phonological structure of a lexical item is the first element a learner is exposed to. The foreign sounds and their strange combinations are the first difficulties to be overcome. These difficulties are very precisely described in the results of contrastive studies between L1 and L2 (at least for European languages). These descriptions have been generally accepted since the early days of structuralism and here we can take them for granted.

3. Hierarchy of difficulty in teaching foreign vocabulary

The contrastive studies criterion and method was applied by Robert Lado (1957) to work out a hierarchy of difficulty of foreign vocabulary for teaching purposes. The three levels—*easy*, *normal*, and *difficult*—were selected by Lado according to the principle of the similarity between the mother tongue lexical items and their counterparts in the target language. The scale is as follows:

1. Similar in form and meaning—*easy*.
2. Similar in form but different in meaning—*easy*.

3. Similar in meaning but different in form—*normal*.
4. Different in form and meaning—*difficult*.
5. Different in their type of construction—*difficult*.
6. Similar in primary meaning but different in connotation—*difficult*.
7. Similar in meaning but with restriction in geographical distribution—*difficult*.

The phonological structure of a foreign lexical item is difficult to imitate for a learner because he/she does not receive it properly, that is, does not hear (recognize) foreign sounds. The difficulty starts at the *intake* stage when the *input* form is not properly received, for example, pronunciation of English [ð] which is received as [δ] by a Polish learner.

Input	Intake	Output
[ðis]	[δis]	[δis]

In result, [δis] becomes the *output* form.

The learner is first exposed to the phonological or orthographic shape of a foreign word. Its pronunciation or spelling is the first source of negative transfer from L1, which, as a rule, distorts the *input*. The *intake* which is memorized has interlanguage erroneous form. It is here that a foreign accent in L2 starts. Language teaching methodologists insist that this form at the stage of *intake* should be worked on, and they apply exercises to make the learner aware of the differences between the *input* form and its *intake* counterpart in order to eradicate erroneous pronunciation or spelling.

Polish teachers, for example, would assign exercises to make Polish learners hear the English [∂] or [—] sounds, which do not exist in Polish and have to be contrasted with Polish [δ] or [*e*] counterparts in order to be properly perceived, acquired, and memorized in their proper English form.

English [|], for example, is not pronounceable by a Pole because in Polish it never occurs without [κ] following it, so Poles have a natural tendency to pronounce *doing*, *speaking* as [δυ)|κ, σπικ)|κ]. Pronouncing [|] without [κ] is a strenuous experience which does not help memorization. Also strings like *stone*, *window*, or *door* do not make any sense to a Polish learner. They do not enter any network of associations. Without associations they are not well retained and their semantic structures (meanings) are not acquired yet.

The phonological strings which are to be acquired or which tend to be acquired are very difficult to memorize. They are strings without any meaning and sense. They also have a foreign and strange phonological structure which the learner is not used to. They strike and irritate with, for example, their strange consonant clusters, or other strange phonological features.

Recent approaches to the phonological structure of items concentrate more on the retention aspect. With the development of psycholinguistics, phonological structure (stage 2) is studied in relation to retention (stage 4) and not in relation

to the phonological structure of the L1 counterpart lexical item (see Lado, 1957 above).

The length of a word is an important factor here (Gatherole & Baddley, 1993, p. 27). According to specialists in working memory, short words, in the process of language acquisition, are easier to retain than long ones. They undergo more subvocal rehearsal than long ones within the same time period and thus are better retained.

It has also been established that lexical items which are acquired in pairs are retained better when they differ in many phonemes than when they differ in only one. *Cat—mat*, when presented together, are not retained as well as, for example, the pair *cat—dog*. This is not merely due to auditory discriminability, according to Gatherole and Baddley (1993, p. 11).

4. Memorization and retrieval of vocabulary

The tip of the tongue (TOT) is the process of searching for a lexical item (whether ordinary word or name) which we have on tip of the tongue but cannot completely recall. It shows that certain elements of phonological structure are retained better than others. When trying to recall a name or a word we usually remember (and have them on tip on the tongue):

1. the first sound,
2. the number of syllables (the length of a word),
3. the place of stress,
4. a suffix.

Usually we do not remember all of them at the same time. It seems that a given lexical item is represented in the memory by a frame, with the place of stress indicated. The frame has the proper length, that is, number of syllables. It also includes the first sound and/or the last one.

r	‘ct	_	re	‘ject

In the process of recall, individual phonemes are inserted, but they seem to be the least important information which is stored. The above four elements seem to be more important in the hierarchy of recall than individual phonemes.

A beginner foreign language learner is very sensitive to the phonological shape of the new code. He/she is much more aware of the phonological and morphological structure of vocabulary items than advanced learners who automatically move from sound (or spelling) to meaning. This awareness is docu-

mented by many studies and their results. First of all, association tests provide this evidence. Beginners respond to lexical stimuli with phonologically similar reactions. One association made by an English speaker learning the Polish *piwo* (beer) was with *piwnica* (cellar), unlike advanced learners of English who responded with semantically related reactions, for example, *black—white* or the stimuli translations *black—czarny*.

Native speakers of Polish respond to *piwo* by associating it with a pub or a favorite brand of beer. *Piwnica* is probably associated more with storing food than with beer. In spite of the fact that *piwo* and *piwnica* are historically and thus morphologically related, the associations of proficient speakers are holistic and semantic. Such phonological and morphological analysis of items is typical of beginners who interpret *outline* as *out of line,* and *nevertheless* as *never less* (Laufer, 1989). Competent speakers react to lexical items holistically, that is, to their meanings and not their forms.

A new lexical item for beginners is a string of nonsense sounds. The situation can be compared to the early experiments on memory performed by Hermann Ebbinghaus in 1885. He coined nonexistent one-syllable strings in order to avoid any meaningful associations. In this way Ebbinghaus studied the capacity of the memory for nonsense strings. After one hour 40% of the items were forgotten; by the next day another 20% of the strings had disappeared. The capacity of the memory to retain meaningless syllable strings is not very impressive and this is also the case of memorization of foreign lexical items before they are linked with their meanings (stage 3).

Associations help memorization and then retrieval of lexical items. Association exercises have been used for ages as learning techniques in language pedagogy. But the explanation of those memory processes came with the development of psychology and can be found for example in the semantic memory models and other psychological evidence.

Some foreign words resemble L1 items. This is especially common among European languages with cognate words. Some French words look and sound like English or Polish words (Arabski, 2005).

French	**English**	**Polish**
Discussion	discussion	dyskusja
Élégance	elegance	elegancja
Clone	clone	klon
Sonnet	sonnet	sonet
Telephone	telephone	telefon

They are therefore easier to memorize (see Lado, 1957 above).

A newly encountered foreign phonological string is meaningless and arbitrary. In this respect it is like a proper name. Proper names, like foreign words,

share many features from the point of view of memory. There are, however, exceptions in both cases. Some proper names have meanings, like *Baker* or *Smith*. There is, however, evidence that they are harder to recall as names than as meaningful occupations (Cohen & Burke, 1993, p. 250).

> Thus, the name *Baker* is more difficult to recall than the occupation *baker*, an effect that cannot be attributed to differences in the phonological form or frequency of occurrence of occupations *vs* proper names […] the relative meaninglessness of proper names compared to other words is a source of vulnerability in memory because names such as *Baker* cannot be encoded in such a rich semantic network as words like *baker*. That is, we know many more semantic propositions about the occupation baker than the name *Baker*.

Another explanation is offered below (Cohen & Burke, 1993, p. 259):

> Semenza (Semenza & Zettin, 1988) has emphasized the status of proper names as 'pure referring expressions' which, in philosophical terms, have reference but not sense, and thus are relatively meaningless. He has offered a theoretical explanation of the difficulty of recalling proper names in terms of the type/token distinction, which draws attention to structural differences between the representation of proper names and object names. An object name (like *cabbage*) refers to a type, or category, whereas a proper name like *Bill Clinton* refers to a token, or individual. Thus, the link between name and referent is one-to-many for type reference (because the name refers to all the members of the category) but one-to-one for token reference. This model makes the assumption that token reference would necessarily be weaker than type reference because of its reliance on a single link. Type reference, and hence retrieval of object names, would benefit from activation converging from the many-to-one links on the target name.

The proper name *Cabbage* is connected with a person by one link.

$$P \rightarrow N$$

The object name *cabbage* is a part of a system of associations and has many links (A–H) leading to the name directly or indirectly which help memorization and recall (Figure 1).

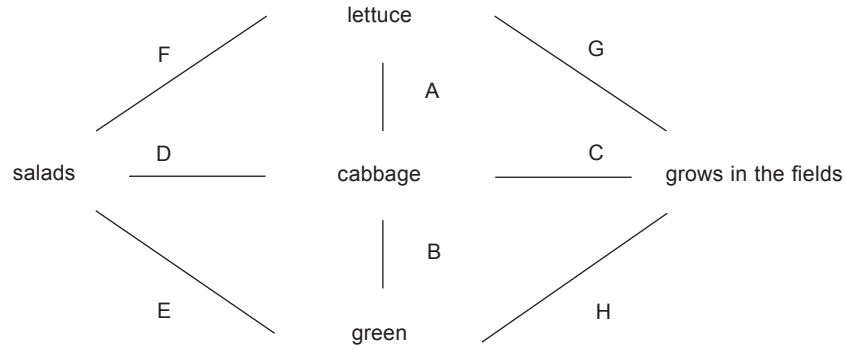

Figure 1. System of associations

In order to retrieve the name *Cabbage* one has to activate exactly one connection P–N. In the case of *cabbage* activating any connection A–H will lead to the object name.

Foreign vocabulary items, like proper names, lack semantic networks because either they are new to the lexical system or the system has not been created yet. Depending on a learner's level of proficiency in L2 a new lexical item has the status of a new lexical item to the existing system, or it is an item which is a stage in creating the lexical base of that system. In both cases there are no association networks which would help its memorization and then its retrieval.

A learner is to rely on the TOT phenomenon (above explained) to retrieve a newly acquired lexical item which is not a member of an associative network yet. Proper names are arbitrary and "meaningless," in similar fashion to new lexical items. Proper names have referents but no sense. They refer to tokens or individuals, unlike common names, which refer to types and categories and thus are integrated into a set of associative links, that is, into a memory system. Proper names, like the foreign vocabulary, do not have alternative forms or synonyms.

The link connecting a token with its referent is much weaker than the one connecting a type or category with a common name, because it is a single link. A type or category is interlinked with the whole associative network. During the process of retrieval of a common name this network activates, converging from the many-to-one-links on the target noun.

There are reports of clinical cases in which in some patients the memory for proper names is preserved and that for common names is impaired, which means that proper names have links separate from those of common names.

There is much evidence that items with meaning are retained better than ones without meaning, and that meaning helps retention. In an experiment conducted by Jenkins (1974) two groups of subjects, all native speakers of English, listened to a list of English words. One group was to concentrate on certain elements of spelling of the words from the list. The other group was to check on the list if the word was "pleasant" or "unpleasant." The difference in recall between the groups was quite

impressive. The group checking for spelling did not remember many words, unlike the group checking for the meaning of the items from the list. Meaning seems to be a decisive factor influencing retention. Through meaning the lexical elements to be remembered acquire individual associate networks in the learner and are retained better. Interpreting the results of his studies, Jenkins (1974, p. 187) says:

> In exploring the effect of many different incidental tasks we have discovered that instructions that focus the subject on the form of a word (its spelling, sound, length, and so on) are very destructive to recall, while instructions that focus on the meaning (rating for pleasantness, judging how often people would use the word, giving an adjective or noun that can be used with the word, and so on) give excellent recall. In other words, this experiment demonstrates that recall is not just a function of what the outside world presents to you but also is a function of what you do with the events as you experience them.

The beginning of lexis acquisition is most probably characterized by the single connection of a phonological form with its meaning and its semantic trace. This is especially true when the acquisition takes place in natural conditions without reference to L1.

Figure 2. From meaning to phonological form

When the meaning is integrated into the associative network of meaning and memory the learner's awareness of the phonological structure disappears and is replaced by a holistic reaction to a lexical item (Figure 2).

This stage is referred to by psycholinguists as "the disappearance of the verbal memory and the retention of the memory for ideas" (Bartlett, 1932; Ellis & Beattie 1986, p. 246). It is at this stage in L1 that children change the wording when retelling a story. In L2 it probably takes place at the first stages of paraphrasing or when generating new sentences. From this point onwards, syntactic information, for example, passive versus active voice, is not retained, but only the meaning of a message.

The separation of phonological structure from meaning is illustrated by the situation in which a message is remembered without its exact wording. Indeed, quite often among bilingual speakers the information is retained without the code (the language) it was conveyed in. This is the stage in which a story ceases to be a text and becomes a plot. The lexical item in question gets integrated into a network of associations and is combined with earlier acquired knowledge and lexis. When retrieved it is not by itself any more but rather is accompanied by the entire structure of associations that it is a part of.

5. Associations in studying vocabulary acquisition

The present author (Arabski, 1988) studied the reactions of Polish students to English stimuli. Sixty-six Polish students of English were asked to produce their associations and reactions to 110 English word-stimuli. Over 70% of the reactions were English lexical items while only 12% were Polish ones (the rest were Ø reactions). There were more interlanguage reactions among less advanced learners than among the more advanced group. The majority of interlanguage reactions (57%) were translations (e.g. *table—stół*), which may mean that the semantic trace for both L1 and L2 is common for both vocabulary systems for some time. Among more advanced learners translations were rare. They responded with intralanguage reactions of the *table—chair* kind (Figure 3).

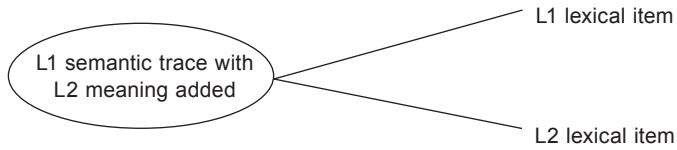

Figure 3. Interlanguage associations

Some of the interlanguage associations, however, are not translations. They are of a dog—kot (cat) type which shows that interlanguage associating goes beyond translations (Figure 4). The reaction to dog is the result of the association link between the compound (L1+L2) semantic trace and another English trace cat or the Polish one kot.

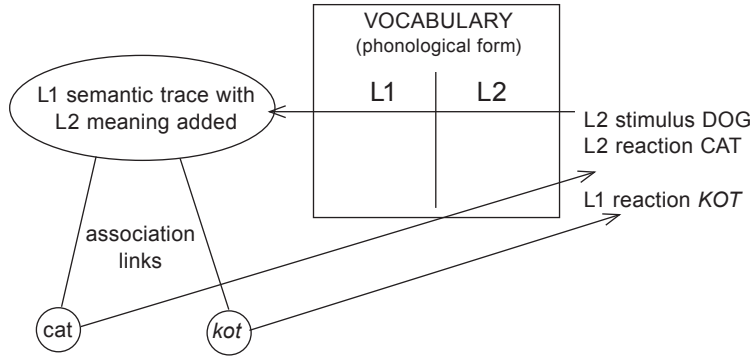

Figure 4. *dog—kot* associations

Some of the reactions (very few) are phonetic ones and they do not have any semantic origin. The stimulus whiff does not reach the semantic trace to cause semantic reaction. It stays within the range of the phonetic shape of the L2 item and gives the phonetic reaction in L1 uf (Polish exclamation—phew) (Figure 5).

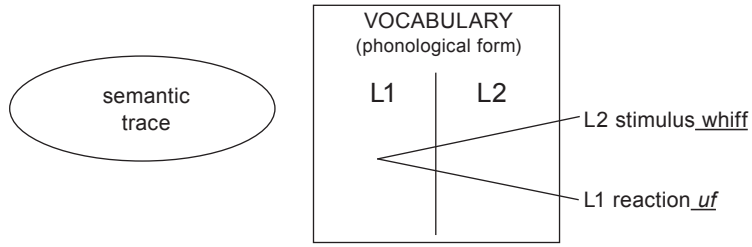

Figure 5. Phonetic reaction

The above figures illustrate the association types, which in turn reflect ways of vocabulary storage in the process of L2 acquisition. Some items are fully integrated into the L2 system, while some are still associated with L1 vocabulary system and are not yet integrated into the L2 association network. Still others do not cause any semantic associations and have the status of foreign sound strings. To a learner they are yet without meaning. Meaning will be attached to them in the next phase of acquisition.

According to Gerganov (1984), the acquisition of a lexical item entails acquisition of its associational structure on top of its meaning and relevant syntactic information. The results of association tests, especially the early ones (e.g. Kent, Rosanoff, 1910), served to establish association norms. These results show that among native speakers of a given language the associations are quite regular and predictable, and thus they are an essential part of language proficiency. Being proficient in English, therefore, means acquiring English lexical association networks and associate, for example, *white* with *black* or *green* with *meadow*.

Association is in turn very strictly connected with retention and memory. The memory models of, for example, Quillian (1968) and Collins, Loftus (1965) (to mention only three names) present semantic memory as a network of associations and are a continuation of the old concept of associationism in psychology.

It is relevant here to consider the results of a questionnaire distributed by the present author among advanced learners of English which showed that learners consciously use many techniques to retain new vocabulary items. Some of them are very inventive, such as the application of drawings and colors. The most common are association strategies: the subjects associated new foreign vocabulary with vocabulary items in Polish and other languages. Almost everyone in this survey learns vocabulary in context, not only to learn its use but also to use context as a point of reference and an association element which helps retention.

6. Semantic networks in vocabulary acquisition

In the case of regular language use, when a full lexical system is in operation, we have many lexical alternatives at our disposal. When an item like *vehicle* is not available one can retrieve *car*, *Pontiac*, etc. We can use synonyms or a paraphrase. In the case of foreign vocabulary, as in the case of a proper name, only one item is looked for and alternatives are not possible since only one item is present in the new system at this level of foreign language lexical proficiency.

In the process of L2 development a given lexical item becomes more and more integrated into the semantic network of the learner. The meaningless string of sounds or letters becomes more and more meaningful and is perceived more holistically. The string of sounds becomes a word which is integrated into a semantic network. At this stage of acquisition the access to the item is through the system of associations, through a semantic network. Memorization enters the next stage. Lexical elements which share common semantic features and thus are associated are more quickly and effectively memorized.

The following table (Rudzka et al., 1985, p. 187) presents a list of vocabulary items related semantically (Table 2). All of them concern "reduction to small pieces." A list like this was used to teach with semantic grids and proved to be a better method for teaching foreign vocabulary than other methods used in a control group (Mansouri, 1985).

Table 2. A list of vocabulary items related semantically

chop	dice	cube	shred	Slice	mince	grate	Meaning
+							cut through
+							with a blow or blows from a sharp-edged instrument
+	+	+	+	+			cut
			+				tear
					+		reduce to small pieces
					+		by forcing under pressure through small holes
						+	rub against a surface containing small sharp--edged holes
+							into small pieces
	+						into small cubes
		+					into cubes
			+			+	into small irregular strips or long narrow pieces
				+			into flat pieces

The differences between individual lexical items in the above list concern only the presence or absence of one or two semantic features. The basic meaning is the same for all of them, and thus the items are easier to acquire than the ones which are unrelated semantically.

"All memory, whether trained or untrained is based on association" (Lorayne & Lucas, 1981, p. 5). Lexical items which are comprehended holistically are memorized through semantic associations. Teaching the new words in context helps memorization because the context elements are points of reference for associations.

7. Vocabulary teaching

Teaching vocabulary items when they are comprehended as meaningless and arbitrary phonological strings is a different matter. The teaching techniques here have to make them more meaningful. There are all kinds of memory techniques which add meaning to the meaningless data, one of them being the key word method. A key word is used to connect semantically an L1 word with a target L2 word.

In order to remember for instance the English word *lazy* one can use a Polish key word *leżeć* (to lie), to associate it with the Polish *leniwy* and then *leżeć* with *lazy*. The link between *leniwy* and *leżeć* is semantic similarity and between *leżeć* and *lazy* physical similarity (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Associations links

Techniques like the key word technique have been used for ages in the European tradition to teach Latin vocabulary. These days, when foreign languages are taught for communication, new vocabulary is taught in context which helps memorization, but for the beginning stages of foreign lexis acquisition other techniques which transform meaningless strings into meaningful ones are still valid. The mnemonic strategies which have been used in language teaching for ages serve the same purpose, since they change meaningless strings into meaningful ones.

Retention means integrating a new lexical item into an existing network of associations. The item is then stored along with semantically related ones. The evidence for this process is mistakes, which consist in replacing one item by another. But as a rule this substitution is of the same syntactic category, for

example, "give me that *book*" instead of "that *map*." A mistake of the type "give me that *happiness*" is very unlikely in this situation. *Map* is stored in the neighborhood of *book* but far away from *happiness.*

The situation is, however, much more complicated in the retrieval process, since we get to some lexical items through "the tip of the tongue" (TOT) procedure. We remember a first sound or a last one, or sometimes only the length of an item. Clearly, access to lexis is through its phonological structure as well.

8. Concluding remarks

To sum up, it seems that the lexical items that are memorized and stored in the semantic memory are also retrieved from there. Those which are not yet part of the association system have to be retrieved in the phonological stage. The retrieval process starts with the semantic stage; if unsuccessful, it continues to the phonological stage where TOT and other similar processes take place.

It seems that the final memorization stage is achieved when a learner's reaction to a lexical item is holistic, and when an item is integrated into a system of intralanguage associations, and when the phonological stage serves only for automatic encoding of a given meaning. Incomplete acquisition is characterized by the situation in which a given meaning gets to the phonological stage and searches for a phonological form. The status of foreign acquisitions in this situation resembles the status of proper names in the memory.

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Janusz Arabski

Przyswajanie znaczenia słów obcojęzycznych

Streszczenie

Artykuł traktuje o przyswajaniu znaczenia słów obcojęzycznych, jako jednego z elementów przyswajania słownictwa obcojęzycznego. Jest to więc przyswajanie mówionej raczej niż pisanej formy słowa wraz z jego znaczeniem. Proces ten przebiega etapami; poprzez połączenie struktury fonologicznej ze strukturą semantyczną, a następnie zapamiętanie tego związku, przechowanie go w pamięci i wydobycie go z pamięci. Poszczególne etapy przyswajania słownictwa zostały omówione po kolei. Główny nacisk położono na techniki zapamiętywania obcojęzycznej struktury, która – jak w przypadku nazwiska – trudna jest do zapamiętywania, gdyż – tak jak nazwiska – nie tworzy skojarzeń, nie ma bowiem znaczenia. Techniki tworzenia skojarzeń, służące zapamiętywaniu i wydobywaniu z pamięci, omówiono wraz z objaśnieniem procesów skojarzeniowych. Mowa tu o procesach skojarzeniowych interjęzykowych, które występują przy zapamiętywaniu wyrazów obcojęzycznych.

Janusz Arabski

Die Erlernung von der Bedeutung der Fremdwörter

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag handelt über die Erlernung von der Bedeutung der Fremdwörter als eines Elementes der Fremdwörtererlernung. Es ist also viel mehr die Aneignung von der gesprochenen als der geschriebenen Form des Wortes samt dessen Bedeutung. Der Prozess verläuft in Etappen: zuerst wird die phonologische Struktur mit der semantischen Struktur verbunden, dann wird der Zusammenhang gemerkt und im Gedächtnis behalten, um schließlich aus dem Gedächtnis gewonnen zu werden. Die einzelnen Erlernungsetappen von dem Wortschatz werden hier der Reihe nach behandelt. Der Nachdruck wird dabei auf verschiedene Einprägungstechniken der fremdsprachigen Struktur gelegt; diese Struktur – wie z.B.: ein Name – ist schwer merkbar, denn sie bildet keine Assoziationen, weil sie bedeutungslos ist. Die Techniken, Assoziationen zu bilden, die zum Merken und zur Gewinnung aus dem Gedächtnis dienen sollen werden zusammen mit Assoziationsprozessen besprochen. Es handelt sich dabei um intersprachliche Assoziationsprozesse, die beim Merken der fremden Wörter auftreten.